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ABSTRACT

A program for low-achieving students at a Connecticut community college involves one course combining the fundamentals of reading and writing, which is taught in conjunction with a college-level, introductory psychology course. This program is based on four assumptions: that adult learners can gain critical consciousness within a literacy program, that academic faculty can learn to teach nontraditional students effectively, that literacy skills should be taught together, and that reading and writing can be taught together with an academic course (in this case, introductory psychology). Through the structured coordination of courses, students make use of their abilities to think, learn, and communicate. (JM)

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AN INNOVATIVE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROGRAM INTEGRATING THE FUNDAMENTALS OF READING AND WRITING WITH A COLLEGE LEVEL INTRODUCTORY PSYCHOLOGY COURSE

The purposes of the community college can be viewed from several perspectives. One is the egalitarian view. Many saw the establishment of community colleges as an effort to democratize higher education. These eulogists saw community colleges providing an opportunity for each individual to progress as far as his interests and abilities would permit, thus achieving an equal chance to compete for economic privileges in a democratic society. However, there are those who would contradict this viewpoint. Revisionists such as Bowles, Bintis, and Karabel see the community colleges as an integral part of the economic system, playing a dual role by imparting technical and social skills and appropriate motivations to increase the productive capacity of workers and by perpetuating the social, political, and economic conditions of a hierarchical society.

However one may view the community college, it is clear that while it may offer equality of opportunity, little is done to achieve equality of educational effects. The creation of the "open door" admissions policy, a vital feature of the community college, has resulted in the admission of students who would otherwise be alienated academically, economically, and socially from higher education.

The presence of a considerable number of academically disadvantaged, low-achieving students with poor literacy skills has created a dual problem within these institutions. On one hand, these non-traditional college students cannot take advantage of the offerings of the college which might help them to achieve the promised equality. They come to the community college with goals, sometimes unrealistic, which they have no chance of fulfilling without literacy and academic skills. For a semi-literate or illiterate person to take advantage of what the community college may offer in helping him to transform his life in any way, he must be able to read and write. Not only must the formerly illiterate gain these skills, but he must also grasp the significance of them as he can apply them to himself personally. On the other hand, the

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presence of such students creates problems for the faculty. Few community college teachers are prepared in special junior college programs. Most have neither the training nor theexperience to teach these non-traditional students. Instructors have needs, as do students, to experience success. When success is denied to to them by the presence of students with poor academic skills whom they are ill-prepared to teach, they often respond with hostility. This hostility may take the form of ignoring the non-traditional students which convinces such students of their own personal deficits and persuades them to take themselves out of the institution. It may also take the form of advocating normative excellence or selective admissions so that students "who don't belong in college" will not be admitted in the first place. The resulting high drop-out rate, particularly among the non-traditional students, suggests that the promise implicit in open-enrollment has not been kept.

Open-door admissions policies are only appropriate if the students' goals are attainable within the limits of their academic ability, or if special programs exist to prepare them for a regualr course of study. This creates the problem of maintaining a quality higher education program which ensures the employability of its graduates and the transferrability of its credits, while providing for the needs of low-skilled and learning disabled students.

The primary response of the community college to the non-traditional student has been the creation of remedial courses in both the fundamental reading and writing skills. The effectiveness of such courses should be measured by the extent to which students have achieved the literacy and academic skills and their success in the courses of study for which they entered the college. However, the literature indicates that the remedial courses have largely not been successful in teaching the basic skills and their transfer to academic and vocational courses. There is a need for program models and materials which can be used successfully to help community college faculty to work with formerly low-achieving students.

At Norwalk Community College in Connecticut, we are experimenting with a program which teaches literacy skills simultaneously with academic course content. It is designed to be effective with low-achieving students in teaching them the basic language arts and academic skills

and helping them to transfer these skills to an academic area. It is also designed to guide college faculty members in a satisfying experience with these new students.

This program combines the teaching of the fundamentals of reading and writing into one course which is taught in conjunction with a college level introductory psychology course. All students enrolled in C.S. 101-103 (the fundamentals of reading and the fundamentals of writing) are also enrolled in PY 103 (introductory psychology). This requires the active cooperation of the college registrar in devising procedures which permit any college student to enroll in the psychology course but require the three course enrollment for students whose literacy skills are poor (as determined on the College Guidance and Placement Examination). It requires cooperation between the instructor of the fundamentals skills and the psychology instructor. At the minimum, the psychology instructor must provide the fundamentals instructor with his assignments and behavioral objectives. However, this arrangement offers possibilities for far more interchange between the two and this has been our experience.

This program is based on four assumptions. The first is that adult learners can gain critical consciousness within a literacy program. Education should help people to perceive the relationships of people within their world and to deal more efficiently with the existential reality of that world. It should help people to perceive and realize their own resources in improving their lives. While the community college cannot create a society without social stratification or a society with full employment, education can become a transformational act for the learner. A literacy program should not be a mechanical process, but should involve processes which awaken in the learner a more critical and active involvement in his society. By linking affect with cognition, by interrelating skills instruction with materials dealing with the learners' concerns and needs, curriculum can be created which enables students to become both literate and aware of the possibilities of their lives. The integration of a college level introductory psychology course with a fundamentals of reading and writing course can provide students with such skills and insights.

The second assumption is that academic faculty can learn to teach non-traditional students effectively, thereby experiencing success with them and reducing hostility to them. I regard students who have attended school for twelve years, yet have emerged illiterate or semi-literate as " learning disabled". The literature indicates that the common thread of learning disability is difficulty organizing and sequencing. By sharing with academic faculty techniques for organizing materials in both texts, supplementary reading, and in lectures, faculty can learn to apply such techniques themselves. They can perceive that in teaching such students not only is the quality of their work not diluted, but that learning for other students may be enhanced and enriched as well.

Another assumption on which the program is based is that literacy skills should be taught together. Moffett contends that writing is one of the important keys to gaining reading comprehension. He stresses the interplay between reading and writing. He argues that one can learn to read by talking and writing and can learn to talk and write by reading. All four areas of language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening, are integrated in the combined fundamentals program.They are forms of processing language which, when taught together, can provide for a continuous process of reading material, analyzing its perceived surface structure, gaining meaning through systematic discussion of the material, and gaining insights through reexperiencing the concepts when writing. This interrelation should result in achieving skills and knowledge which make the student more competent and aware.

The fourth assumption is that reading and writing can be taught with an academic course and that introductory psychology can provide the effective vehicle. English is not about itself. One must read and write about SOMETHING. In order for students to make use of the literacy skills within the academic world, they need direct help in using skills taught in a fundamentals of reading and writing course in an actual academic situation. Teaching reading and writing in integration with an academic course may facilitate transfer of skills to other academic disciplines. The curriculum can thus become a specific prescription for student success, complete with the techniques necessary for the achievement of that success. Often students must be convinced of their

own educability and this can be accomplished both attitudinally and by structuring and organizing learning in such a way that success can be achieved. When students can receive direct instruction in reading an assigned text book chapter; gain specific techniques for organizing the material in that chapter; practice reciting the important facts and concepts of that chapter; receive guidance in writing about that chapter; learn methods of test taking on that chapter, they can gain enough success to change their perceptions of themselves as students while mastering the skills necessary for such success.

The focus of the literacy program is that, through structure, students make use of what they already have, that is, a perception of logical thought, sound discrimination, an ability and a desire to communicate, understanding and use of the structure of language, and experiences with others in the world. If the teacher has an organic sense of what structures are most helpful to students in gaining academic skills, the specific materials are irrelevant. Materials from any discipline can be restructured to lead students to gain academic competence, transfer of skills learning, and critical consciousness of their world. If the teacher can use such structured materials for speaking, writing, reading, and listening, students can turn the raw materials of the academic world - textbooks and lectures - into meaningful and useful concepts which they can understand, retain, and communicate.

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